DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 455 EA 017 985

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TITLE The Drive for "Educational Excellence": Implications for the Mental Health of Children.
PUB DATE 20 Apr 85
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association (New York, NY, April 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Children; Child Welfare; Educational Change; *Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; *Health Personnel; Helping Relationship; *Mental Health; Role of Education; School Support; *Staff Role
IDENTIFIERS American Orthopsychiatric Association; *Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

Recent critiques of education in the United States have all too often been simplistic in their solutions and punitive in tone. American education has historically been concerned with providing equality of opportunity and accomodating individual and group differences, yet calls for excellence often devalue these fundamental elements of democracy. Schools are measured by their success in producing the reading, writing, and calculating "machines" that society needs for support and for social and emotional guidance. In a 1984 position statement, the American Orthopsychiatric Association asserted that successful educational reform cannot occur until there is a national mandate for improvement backed by a financial commitment equivalent to that for national defense. Without such a national effort, mental health workers involved in education can only go on trying to help educators help children. This effort involves changing educators' attitudes toward emotional problems, deepening the mental health professional's understanding of educational concepts and methods, and providing support for educators themselves. (PGD)

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The Drive for "Educational Excellence": Implications for the Mental Health of Children*

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*Presented as part of a symposium, meetings of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, New York City, New York, April 20, 1985.

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The Drive for "Educational Excellence": Implications for the Mental Health of Children*

I do not know how you have reacted to the spate of reports over the past several years on what is wrong with education in America and what needs to be done to improve it. I suspect because you have chosen this session at this particular national meeting that many, if not all, of you must feel as I do. Having spent my entire career so far directly in schools or working with schools, I am often depressed by the strident and misinformed rhetoric of powerful politicians about the ills of education. I am often shocked by the narrowness of view coupled with the supreme self-confidence of ideologs who see education as a way to ensure that everyone things and acts as they would have them think and act. I am often, but not always, disappointed with the conclusions reached and recommendations made by the various blue ribbon panels and committees enjoined to study education in the United States. And, mostly, I am disheartened by the simplicity of many of their ideas--the belief that there are easy answers: that a merit raise here, a basic course there, raising the test scores for entry to the field by a few points, or making tenth grade harder will actually improve schools. It is this view - that the schools can be changed by exterior, minor manipulation on command -- that bothers me the most. It makes me think that many of those involved

in preparing these reports and in prescribing what is needed by schools have not been in schools recently, have little idea of the place of schools in our society, and have little sense of the history of education in our country or its significance in a democracy. Schools appear once again, as they have so often in our past, to be a focal point for attending to many of society's problems. In many ways it is akin to blaming the victim, a phenomenon we have seen often in mental health work. There is a meanness of spirit, a punitive quality to the current concern about excellence in education that is distressing.

Actually, our public educational system is a surprising success, not without fault or very serious problems, but a wonder, nevertheless. The reports on the need for excellence too often appear to forget that, unlike most of the western world, our public educational system is dedicated to getting large numbers of children through the first twelve grades and to minimize barriers to further education (Watterberg, 1965). We do not, by system design, cut children off from further education at age 14 or set the path of their life at age 11. According to one source (Poston, 1981), the United States and Canada account for over 75% of the world's 12th graders. In the United States in 1890 in the 14-17 year age group, 6.7% of young people went on to high schools. In 1930, the percentage was 51. In 1980, it was 92.3 (Clifford,

1984). Illiteracy in our country, defined here as inability to read usefully, is more a phenomenon of people over the age of 50 than it is of our present-day children and youth. We have made great strides in this one critical area over the past century despite the need for more improvement. The average length of the school term has gradually increased over the century, from 160 days in 1916 to 180 days now. The average number of days of actual school attendance has increased from 121 in 1960 to 175 today. In 1956, the median school years completed by all persons in the U.S. over the age of 25 was 9.3. Today it is at least one year post high school in college or its equivalent; e.g., technical school (Watterberg, 1965; World Almanac, 1982). So, we have serious problems in our public education system, but as we try to attend to them we should keep in mind what has worked and how far we have come.

I do want to acknowledge that some of the reports about what schools need are thoughtful and helpful in limited ways in that they are based on data and are not especially myopic. I would cite Ernest Boyer's High school: A report on secondary education in America (1983) and John Goodlad's A place called school: Prospects for the future (1983) as examples of especially thoughtful reports well worth reading. As far as I can tell, they

are not getting a great deal of play in the press or in political thinking.

I would also bring to your attention a brief report prepared only a year ago which, in my opinion, says more than many other reports and has been read by almost no one. The reasons are obvious. The report carries no political clout. It is sponsored by a partisan group concerned with the welfare of children and youth. It offers no easy solutions. But it happens, in my view, to be correct and to point in the directions which must be considered if we are to continue to strive toward enlightened, democratic education. The report I am referring to is the American Orthopsychiatric Association's (AOA) position statement on educational reform (1984). We presented it at the Toronto meetings a year ago. We sent it to President Reagan, congressmen, senators, and presidential candidates. It was well received and quickly forgotten. It was well received because it made sense. It was quickly forgotten because it is not, in and of itself, implementable. It is not simplistic and it puts schools in broad perspective. That report sums up my own views about excellence in education and its implications for the mental health of children. In brief — very brief — form, here is what it said, embellished some to offer my own wording and interpretation of the import of the report.

Any educational standards that do not take into account opportunity for all children to achieve doom the system to failure. The cornerstone of American education is concern for individual and group differences. Without that concern the educational system serves elitist purposes and impinges on the very basis of our democratic form of government. Educational excellence is not a basketball game in which you applaud only those with the high scores. Yet, we have come to accept a view in which the needy are seen as losers and the advantaged as winners. In this game, the strong win. Actually, excellence is achieved when all students push against the boundaries of their own limits and do the best they possibly can and are rewarded for doing so.

It is unfair and impractical to demand that schools succeed in educating children and youth when the rest of society fails to meet its responsibility to make is possible for schools to succeed. Our society continues to ignore its children and youth. It is a myth that we are a child-oriented society. We are really more a child-exploitative society. It saddens me to say that, but I find little evidence that as a society we like children — all children — well enough to do what is needed to provide them with a decent life. School achievement is intimately related to nutrition, housing, child-care, health service, mental health services. It is likely

that we do a better job of schooling children in general than we do of caring for and about children in these other areas.

Education is not defined only by its outcomes — products; it is a living process as well. The most simplistic view of schooling is that it produces reading, writing, and calculating machines needed for economic productivity. This view of literacy and the purpose of schools is implicit in much of the thinking about excellence in education today. To ignore the value of the quality of daily life in schools is totally to misunderstand how schools should work. Schools involve a social transaction — a collective enterprise — that should teach not only subject matter but how interpersonal relationships can be constructively resolved, how to evaluate critically and to think creatively, how to understand and appreciate plurualism, and how to come to know oneself. As Shulman and Carey (1984) recently pointed out, reasoning and civility are central to real education. Reasoning we all understand, I believe. Civility, as they describe it, is concerned with "the capacity to function as a citizen, an active member of a group in a way that benefits both the individual and the aggregate" (Shulman & Carey, 1984, p. 501).

The teaching of civility is a profoundly complex operation requiring a sophisticated view of teaching and learning, of modeling, of reinforcement, of school climate in which such

teaching can take place. I have not seen it discussed in the reports on excellence I have read.

The AOA report also points out that education does not just take place in schools. A conception of schooling as limited to buildings from 8:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. misses the point of how education really occurs. As mental health workers, you understand better than most the role parents and communities must take in the education of its children. I see little in the reports on excellence on schooling about the necessary links among schools, parents, and community.

One area of agreement in the AOA report with most recent reports on education has to do with teacher salary. It is too low. But the reports do not speak loudly enough to what else is needed to improve how teachers should be valued and nurtured. Many of the teachers I know know they are underpaid but stay in schools because children matter to them. They are good at what they do. They like teaching. They fight a constant battle to keep psychologically able to work. Pay is important. Psychic reward and recognition for their role in society are equally, if not more, important to many teachers.

The AOA report had other things to say, which I will not comment on here, but its major conclusion is important to note because without understanding it, all efforts to improve education

will not succeed in any significant way. Let me quote:

> We believe that useful and permanent educational reform cannot take place until or unless there is a national mandate for educational improvement; backed by a national financial commitment that is at least the equal of our concern for national defense. Education has suffered precisely because our society has not valued it enough. Our national government must take the lead in proclaiming the importance of education as vital to the future of our nation and assigning it the highest possible priority. With such a commitment and with adequate funding from federal, state, local and private sectors, our nation can provide quality education for all its children and youth. Diverse and creative approaches to education can take place in keeping with the heterogeniety of our population and our historical concern for individual differences and universal education. (American Orthopsychiatric Association, 1984, p. 5)

As George Leonard (1984) said about a year ago, "Over the past hundred years, almost every aspect of our national life - industry, transportation, communication, entertainment - has changed almost beyond recognition. Our schools remain essentially the same." (I would add, however, but more effective for more children). He goes on "And now, in the space age, the reformers are offering the

nation an educational horse and buggy. They would improve the buggy, keep the passengers in it longer and pay the driver more. But it would still be a horse and buggy" (p. B1).

Here, in summary of these particular remarks, are some quotes I read recently I wish I had said (Dagley & Gazda, 1984). They express some of the concerns I have so far expressed and some of the values I believe are needed for true reform to take place toward excellence in education:

"There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals."

"The greatest motivator of teachers is student success."

"The crisis in education can only be overcome by creative risk takers at all levels in education" (and I would add, in government as well) (p. 222).

"Students are the basics" (p. 224).

I think you can see why I am often depressed. The kind of commitment needed is not likely to happen during the next four years and maybe not at all in my life time. Yet, without such commitment, I am not optimistic that the level and kinds of changes needed will take place. Educational change goes through cycles like so many other aspects of our lives. We make cosmetic changes. We become involved in empassioned argument about heterogeneous classes versus homogeneous classes, open versus traditional class

groupings, phonics versus sight reading, and nothing much really changes in the long run. I do not foresee significant changes in the quality — the excellence — of education in our country over the next decade. I do see movement. As we already know, many states, responding to the political expediency of the drive for educational excellence, have passed laws or are planning to pass laws to do something that shows concern for good education. Merit pay is popular. Salaries are boosted. Career ladder programs are introduced. More teacher testing is done. Voucher plans are proposed. Fine, I guess. But do not look for any discernable real changes in education resulting from these alterations. Did you suddenly become a better mental health worker when you got a 10% raise? How much did you improve when you had to justify your job by taking a test to get a license?

With all this said, given these circumstances, what can be done? What do we do about it? Well, as mental health workers and as educators, we continue to do what those of us who are truly professional always have done — the best we can. We concentrate on the few we serve, on the districts we work in, on the schools we know, and we do the best we can to see that things do not get worse there, and that those children and youth brought to our attention get our best services. In other words, in mental health terms, although we know prevention is far better in the long run than

treatment, we treat. We help out; we pick up the pieces after harm has been done. We do what we can.

Let me tell you at this more mundane everyday level of service to and for schools something I have learned over the years that has implications for the mental health of children; if not for all children, then for the children we can influence through our own direct actions.

It is not common knowledge in the mental health world, unfortunately, but schools are not clinics. Schools and educators are concerned mainly with the education of children and youth; how they are managed, taught and organized. They are not unmindful of pupil problems, both internal and external, that influence school behavior and learning, but their primary reasons for concern are teaching and learning and managing. As a psychologist and educator, I have long been concerned, as I am sure you are if you are in the business, about how best to help other persons help children. Helping school professionals to help children is not quite the same as helping children directly with emotional, social, family, and community problems. If helping children to be the best they can be includes helping school personnel to do the best they can with and for these children, then the problems of locus of effort, communication between mental health worker and educator, and respect for and understanding of the school as a work setting

with its own goals and life style become important variables in determining how successful we are in helping schools to help children.

Let me give you one example of what I mean. Eli Bower (1960) many years ago, with his colleagues, introduced into the literature in a way that mattered, a distinction between the terms "emotionally disturbed" and "emotionally handicapped" pointing out that the term "handicapped" has less of a black or white connotation of a disease, makes emotional problems comparable to other handicaps such as retardation or hearing and visual difficulties, and must be measured or defined by a lasting and persistent quality. A handicap gets in the way of normal living. People can overcome or compensate for handicaps. Education is a way to deal with handicaps. The shift in terminology from "disturbed" to "handicapped" has, in my opinion, had a profound influence on how children have been seen in schools over the past 25 years or so. A small matter of nuance? No: a matter of ownership of a problem. Handicaps are something educators understand. Educators can work with handicaps. Children can compensate for handicaps. The language shift from disturbed to handicapped is a critical perceptual and cognitive shift. The shift lets the educator in on the education of the child. Disturbed children are the business of mental health professionals,

not educators, handicapped children are the business of educators. I don't know exactly what Eli Bower had in mind when he proposed this shift in terminology, but my analysis of its meaning suggests it has been profoundly influential in the involvement of educators in the lives of children with emotional problems.

I use this one example to illustrate a point. Many mental health gains we want for children with whom we work are made by improved schooling. With many children and youth, we cannot affect major life change through therapeutic endeavor without commensurate changes in family status. Hence, the great interest these days in family therapy, and also in community assistance. But for many children and youth, commensurate changes in school are also required. Often we assume that changes in other aspects of a child's life will begin to influence school behavior in children, and sometimes we are correct. But changes in school also go hand in hand with other changes, and these changes can be manipulated or influenced through the kind of contact we have with school administrators, teachers and school pupil personnel workers such as school psychologists, guidance counselors, and learning disability specialists. Mental health workers have status in the minds of many educators, often resented, but with recognition that they know some things too. The lowering of resentment and the carrying of useful messages to educators is what I am talking about now. It

may seem a small point in the drive for educational excellence, but sometimes our contact with schools is all we can offer as professionals rather than as concerned citizens.

Many mental health gains for children are made by what happens in a classroom and in a school building. Children who succeed in learning gain self-esteem which is the equal of anything that can be accomplished in psychotherapy. We help children greatly when we learn the language of schools and address our understandings to the needs, purposes, and concerns of educators. It is of no use to the education of children for administrators or teachers to come away from meetings with mental health workers or read their reports only to feel somehow left out, misunderstood, less competent, or frustrated by our lack of understanding of their tasks and the problems involved in educating children and administered schools. This is not an accusation. It is a plea for an additional element in good mental health work in the interest of children and youth. In schools, rules and consequences of behavior matter. Time on task matters. The mental health of teachers matters. Translation of mental health principles to school ways matters. Respect matters. Mental health workers help to improve schools and help schools to strive for excellence, with implications for the mental health of children, when they listen to teachers and try to help teachers translate mental health knowledge and understandings into

curricular, management, interpersonal and organizational terms; not by telling educators how to educate, but by providing them information and helping them to incorporate such knowledge into their educational methods in educational terms. There is a saying on the wall in my office "Parents - listen to your children." I would add here. "Mental health workers - listen to your educators."

Back to the national scene. The drive for excellence is a long drive. It is something you work toward; not something you solve. Right now, it has been so presented that it virtually leaves out concern for the handicapped, for vocational education, for the quality of life of teachers, for large numbers of children whose particular brand of disadvantagment requries special attention; ethnic minorities, the poor — the growing number of poor children, those living in urban ghettos and rural isolation.

For years, those of us in mental health have worked at the fringes of the problem. Our concerns have not been heard as clearly as they should be. I have pointed out that part of the reason is that we have talked to ourselves in our own terms rather than trying to translate our concerns to the mainstream of ideas and issues involved in schooling, education, and schools. I hope we can make that translation better than we have so far, both at the organizational level through the influence of our national and

state professional associations, and at the level of practice when we work directly with particular schools or children who are in schools.

Thank you.

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